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Promotion by Degrees: Myth or Magic in the Marine Corps

Major Les Stein, U.S. Marine Corps

One of the most enduring arguments among U.S. military officers focuses on the subject of promotion opportunities. While there are officers who believe that "performance" determines success, others are convinced that success is a direct result of "who you know." A sizeable percentage also believe that performance dictates success until a particular rank is achieved, whereupon personal contacts and general reputation are the determining factors. Officers who are searching for the golden rule of thumb towards advancement will be disappointed by the promotional criteria that are largely determined by a number of independent and often unpredictable variables.

A study of promotion statistics indicates that Marine Corps officers are better educated today than ever before. While their structured strength has changed less than a half percent since 1960, more than twice as many officers now hold master's and doctoral degrees.¹ The increase in bachelor's degrees can be explained by the more stringent commissioning policies, but this does not explain the increased number of graduate degree holders. While education beyond a bachelor's degree is not required of unrestricted officers, many continue their studies in pursuit of advanced degrees. Are they motivated toward such a goal because they perceive its value as career enhancing, or do these officers simply have a personal commitment toward expanding their educational horizons?

The career-enhancing value of graduate degrees has been the subject of "happy hour" discussions for many years as officers seek to improve their chances for promotion. Few will disagree with the idea that performance serves as the most critical consideration in the promotion process, but given

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today's highly inflated evaluation system, can an officer be blamed for seeking a competitive edge?

History

Training of military personnel at civilian institutions dates back to 1868 when prospective medical officers were provided their education under congressional legislation. The National Defense Act of 1920 formalized this practice, and by 1965 eight percent of the authorized personnel strength was permitted to attend civilian colleges and universities.² It seems that the intent of both the Congress and the military hierarchy was to produce officers who could deal effectively with political, economic, scientific, and social problems as they related to their expanding military obligations.

After World War II, graduate education for the military officer was discussed in conjunction with its career enhancement value, gaining momentum when the compiled promotion results of the 1940s proved favorable to officers with graduate degrees. According to Ruben A. Cubero,³ an unwritten official policy grew within the military which gave officers with graduate degrees an edge in the competition for promotions. He noted that during this decade the selection rate of majors with master's degrees to lieutenant colonel was 58 percent as compared to 36 percent for those with no more than a bachelor's degree and 33 percent for those with only two years of college.

Colonel James G. Van Straten argued that "the net effect of Sputnik I, educationally speaking, was a rigorous questioning of U.S. curricula and methodology and a tremendous increase in graduate school enrollment, initially in the hard sciences and later broadening into the humanities and social sciences as well."⁴ He further pointed out that the National Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress, formed in 1964 by President Johnson, argued strongly for using continuing education as a means of preventing human obsolescence. He went on to cite a report of the United States Army which strongly supported the findings of the commission by stating that "as weapons and management systems sophistication increased, so too did the demands for highly educated and trained officers."⁵ In essence, the fear of obsolescence steadily drove the educational aspiration levels of military officers upward.

Other factors having a significant impact on officers' educational aspirations included the changing character of military authority. It was found that the military's infrastructure was displaying characteristics similar to those of large non-military bureaucracies. In other words, the traditional line of authority so often associated with the military structure had been modified to accommodate not only the rising needs of a technological environment but also the changing requirements in the field of organization

and human relations. To a great extent, tradition, often considered the hallmark of military history, was relegated to secondary importance while more emphasis was placed on the decision-making concept. Van Straten found that "Military authority based on status and custom had been forced to share the mantle of power with authority based on expertise—expertise not only on technological matters, but on matters of organization and human relations as well."⁶

Other arguments for the increased emphasis toward graduate degrees for officers lay in the perceived change in the mission of the U.S. military. Once considered a force preparing for the violence of war, it now appeared to be training for the deterrence of war. This shift in attitude can be attributed to the realignment of the nuclear balance. Essentially, the conventional forces within the military were determined to be inconsequential in the face of nuclear weapons. Thus, military officers were becoming far more politically oriented than in the past. This was best evidenced by the dramatic increase in the validation of military positions requiring graduate degrees in the social sciences. Whereas the physical and biological science positions validated for graduate study increased by approximately 70 percent between 1964 and 1967, the business administration validated positions more than tripled, and the social science positions almost quadrupled. According to Jordan and Taylor, "The proliferation of tasks that military officers were being asked to perform as a result of this significant shift in mission served to drive up both the organizationally perceived requirements for graduate degrees and the educational aspiration level of the officer corps."⁷ A litany of social problems during the 1960s added to the pressure to acquire graduate degrees. Racism, drugs, alcohol, and dissent, a consequence of the Vietnam conflict, prompted the Army to validate a number of jobs requiring master's degrees in social psychology and the social sciences in general. It became evident that trained social scientists would enhance the quality of many critical programs.

Ralph E. Haines et al. cited the Department of the Army's report on the quality of its officer schools which stated that "The baccalaureate degree is no longer widely regarded as the hallmark of the educated man; today one out of every four college students remains in school for graduate work, often receiving his degree, and the academic community expects the demand for advanced degrees to increase still more over the next decade."⁸ Lloyd Moses further analyzed the scope of the Army's graduate education program and concluded that it was inadequate in the face of the increasing demands of our technological age.⁹

John W. Masland and Lawrence I. Radway conducted an extended survey of officer preparedness for the various responsibilities inherent in their posts. They found that three sets of qualifications were involved: specific military knowledge as dictated by the particular job; the same qualities as might be

required for executives in non-military organizations; and a combination of executive and military skills. They felt that the "ideal" incumbent would satisfy all three sets of criteria and that a graduate degree would enhance his or her success in this endeavor. Officers are often involved in international policy formulation and diplomatic missions. Also, they often must be well-versed in international affairs, economics, and a host of other non-military subjects. The authors summarized by stating that "officers who are recommending force levels, for example should know when to seek and how to use knowledge of current American foreign policy, fiscal policy, industrial potential or scientific research and development. . . . Political sophistication is as desirable as technical expertise."¹⁰ They cautioned, however, that "versatility" is the key ingredient to a successful career. In essence, he or she must be well-versed in a variety of specialties and still be able to absorb new data and concepts quickly. In reference to advanced degrees they concluded that "The education programs of the armed services are conceptually and administratively part of the training function."¹¹

Officers' Attitudes Toward Graduate Degrees

George McLaughlin conducted a survey of the attitudes of 100 officers who had completed graduate work in business administration and personnel management under the Army's civil schooling program. His findings indicated that those officers were overwhelmingly in favor of the program, fully agreeing with the purpose and need for such an education.¹² In support of this report William Tomlinson argued that the attitude toward graduate education for officers during the 1960s was positive. Career managers within the Armed Forces were encouraging high quality officers to seek advanced degrees. In essence, attaining graduate degrees was perceived as a career enhancing move which would ultimately prove to be professionally rewarding. He concluded that the educational aspirations of military officers was rising steadily throughout this period.¹³

According to Ward Just, military officers quickly made the association between an advanced degree and upward mobility, and by the mid-1960s it was obvious that advanced degrees were a concomitant part of the list of "ticket punching" requirements. He suggested that the officer who desires a military career should "try for a teaching billet at West Point (if he was a West Pointer) or, better still, a master's degree in almost anything—business administration, history, accounting, political science, physics, sociology. . . . The leadership, fascinated now with the concept of the scientist-soldier and the military manager, believes that only the highly educated are capable of taking the institution through the nineteen-seventies."¹⁴

70 Naval War College Review

One of the earliest studies designed to evaluate the impact of education on military promotions was conducted by William Tomlinson as part of his U.S. Army War College thesis. In a survey of 111 officers with graduate degrees, only 7 percent experienced a promotion passover, while 21 percent were selected for promotion ahead of their peers, and 70 percent were selected on time. The remaining 2 percent could be accounted for by resignations and deaths. He further found that of this group, 49 percent were eventually selected for top level schools.¹⁵ In his "Review of Army Officer Educational System, Summary Report," conducted for the Department of the Army, Major General Frank Norris confirmed the earlier statistics but warned against the use of such degrees only for the sake of satisfying a requirement. He argued that "There is always a danger that acquiring an advanced degree can become a ticket-punching exercise and thus detract from professionalism. However, we cannot blame the officer corps for following the promotion lists; the fact is that in recent selections to general officer, an officer without a master's degree has been the exception rather than the rule."¹⁶ He went on to point out that 62 of the 80 general officer selectees on the 1971 promotion list had advanced degrees. In essence, he agreed that the evidence clearly points to the enhancing qualities of advanced degrees but preferred to discourage the ticket-punching mentality, favoring instead a positive approach in the form of benefits gained by both the military and the individual officer.

In his detailed study of the relationship between graduate degrees and officer promotion opportunities in the Air Force, Cubero found some contradictions in the attitudes of Air Force officers toward graduate education. Although his survey population included, almost exclusively, officers who had been selected for graduate studies, only 58 percent felt that the degree was career enhancing. This is somewhat of an anomaly since the officers obviously were selected for schooling as a consequence of their competitive records and one might assume that the degrees would serve to enhance their competitive status. Interestingly, the majority stated that they "were motivated to attain their graduate degree for the dual reasons of professional and personal fulfillment."¹⁷

In direct support of these findings Cubero cited a study conducted in 1966 by the Assistant Secretary of Defense/Manpower and Reserve Affairs which surveyed the attitudes of 11,568 officers between the ranks of first lieutenant and colonel. Although the vast majority (93 percent) felt that their graduate degrees had made them more effective as leaders and managers, only 31 percent of the officers believed that their graduate degrees had made an impact on their promotions, while 63 percent felt that the degree had no impact on promotion successes. In essence, the findings of the study indicated that the consensus among military officers was that advanced degrees are

beneficial to both the individual and the military but do not necessarily enhance one's career.

Based on the available evidence, it seems that the 1960s and 1970s was a testing period for officers with career interests, and one of the measurement criteria for success included graduate education. Such degrees were perceived as a fundamental requirement for success by many officers. In his interview of Army Lieutenant Colonel Zeb B. Bradford, Stuart Loory pointed out that of the six criteria for advancement, Bradford identified an advanced degree as second only to attaining a command billet. Thus, the available information indicated that although the attitudes are mixed, they tend to lean toward the positive career value of a graduate degree.¹⁸

Research

What are Marine Corps officers' attitudes toward the career value of graduate degrees? Do they believe that officers with advanced degrees are better leaders than those without such credentials? I will report only the opinions surrounding the perceived value of graduate degrees as factors in the promotion process. I solicited the opinions of officers in two categories—those with not more than a bachelor's degree and those with a graduate degree (master's and above). My survey distribution and the response rates are included in table 1:

| | Graduate Degree | | Bachelor's Degree Only | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| | Number mailed | Number returned | Number mailed | Number returned |
| Second Lieutenant | 2 | 0 = 0% | 30 | 16 = 53% |
| First Lieutenant | 2 | 2 = 100% | 35 | 25 = 71% |
| Captain | 40 | 36 = 90% | 41 | 24 = 59% |
| Major | 38 | 35 = 92% | 41 | 24 = 59% |
| Lieutenant Colonel | 40 | 40 = 100% | 44 | 25 = 57% |
| Colonel | 22 | 22 = 100% | 20 | 14 = 70% |
| Total mailed | 355 | | | |
| Total responded | 263 | | | |
| Total response rate | 74% | | | |

Table 1

The officers' enthusiastic responses to the survey reinforced my original impression regarding the legitimacy of this issue. The responses were tabulated in two categories—field-grade officers (majors and above) and company-grade officers (captains and below). The questions and their respective response rates are provided below:

72 Naval War College Review

| Company Grade | | Field Grade | |
|------------------|----|----------------|----|
| Yes | No | Yes | No |

1. Do you feel that an officer's career suffers if he/she does not have a graduate degree?

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 35% | 65%* | 21% | 79%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

2. Promotion boards favor graduate degrees in selecting officers for promotion.

| | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 49% | 51% | 31% | 69%* |
|-----|-----|-----|------|

3. Do officers with graduate degrees have more credibility with their superiors than those who do not have such degrees?

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 18% | 82%* | 12% | 88%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

4. All things being equal, the officer with a graduate degree should be promoted ahead of the officer who does not have such a degree.

| | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 52% | 48% | 50% | 50% |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|

5. Do you encourage your fellow officers to pursue off-duty graduate degrees?

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 61% | 39%* | 71% | 29%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

6. Graduate degrees improve one's performance on the job.

| | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 49% | 51% | 60% | 40%* |
|-----|-----|-----|------|

7. Graduate degrees improve one's communication skills both in writing and speaking.

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 83% | 17%* | 82% | 18%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

8. A graduate degree improves one's approach to problem solving.

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 62% | 38%* | 72% | 28%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

Questions 9-11 were directed toward officers without graduate degrees.

9. Do you feel that a graduate degree would be beneficial to your career?

| | | | |
|-----|------|-----|------|
| 86% | 14%* | 63% | 37%* |
|-----|------|-----|------|

10. Do you feel that your superior would give you a better fitness report if you attain a graduate degree?

| | | | |
|-----|------|----|------|
| 25% | 75%* | 3% | 97%* |
|-----|------|----|------|

| | Company Grade | | Field Grade | |
|--|---------------|------|-------------|-----|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| 11. Do you feel that a graduate degree would make you more successful in the Marine Corps? | 60% | 40% | 47% | 53% |
| The remaining questions were directed toward officers with graduate degrees. | | | | |
| 12. Do you feel that your graduate degree has helped you in getting promoted? | 11% | 89%* | 47% | 53% |
| 13. Do you feel that your graduate degree will help you with future promotions? | 50% | 50% | 46% | 54% |

Note: * = $P < .05$ (significance level using Chi Square Test for analysis and validation).

The officers' responses to questions one and two are indicative of their underlying attitudes toward the career value of graduate degrees; the majority (statistically significant) do not believe that an officer's chances for promotion are adversely affected by the absence of a graduate degree. The response rates to the follow-on questions, however, are not necessarily consistent with the first two. Question four, for instance, surfaces a bias on the part of both officer groups—given two officers with similar performance records (not altogether unlikely under today's system of evaluation), but separated by the fact that one officer has a graduate degree while the other does not, half would choose the officer with a graduate degree for promotion. Remember, a significant majority originally stated that officers' careers do not suffer if they lack a graduate degree.

The responses to questions five through eight also seem to support a bias in favor of graduate degree holders, but the results are somewhat misleading. The apparent inconsistency between these responses and the responses to questions one and two led me to ask six company-grade and six field-grade officers to interpret the questions and elaborate on their answers. Each officer said that he could not argue with the overall academic value of a graduate degree for it can only serve to improve one's basic communication and administrative skills. They quickly added, however, that the only effect such an education might have on their careers would be potentially to make

them more efficient officers; the credential alone, they argued, would not improve the chances for promotion.

The responses to questions 12 and 13, by officers with graduate degrees, also identified an anomaly. The response rate of the company-grade officers to question 12 was to be expected, given that very few fail promotion between lieutenant and captain, but the field-grade officers' response rate was not at all convincing (just a little over half of them felt that their graduate degrees had not helped them in getting promoted). Furthermore, the rate of response, by both groups, to question 13 was significantly different from the line of logic that produced the answers to questions one and two (46% of the field-grade officers felt that their graduate degrees would enhance their chances for future promotions). In all, I was left with the distinct impression that Marine Corps officers are apprehensive and confused about this issue.

In order to gain some factual insight into the relationship between promotion opportunities and graduate degrees, I requested specific information from the Defense Manpower Data Center in Monterey, California. The information proved to be comprehensive although the raw data did not differentiate between officers who had attained their degrees as part of a Marine Corps-sponsored graduate degree program or by means of off-duty enrollment in local colleges or universities. Table 2 depicts the average promotion rates, by rank and degree level, between 1972 and 1984:

Marine Corps Promotion Rates (1972-1984)

| Rank | AD% | BD% | ND% |
|------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Captain to Major | 83 | 74 | 60 |
| Major to Lt. Colonel | 67 | 55 | 39 |
| Lt. Colonel to Colonel | 56 | 46 | 30 |
| Colonel to General | 9 | 7 | 1 |

AD—Advanced Degree (master's or higher)

BD—Bachelor's Degree

ND—No College Degree

Table 2

Although the data is self-explanatory, it is important to point out that the promotion percentages during this period did not necessarily rise with each year in favor of graduate degree holders. For instance, in 1984 more lieutenant colonels with bachelor's degrees only were promoted than those with graduate degrees. As a 13-year average, however, the statistics favor the officers with graduate educations; and at no time during this period were promotion rates for those without college degrees better than for either of the other two groups.

On the basis of the information provided thus far, one might readily reach a number of conclusions, none of which would necessarily be correct. On the one hand, although the percentage differentials are not substantial for any of the rank categories, the promotion statistics (table 2) indicate that Marine Corps officers with graduate degrees have fared better in promotions than those with only bachelor's degrees. Conversely, a substantial majority of today's Marine Corps officers feel that officer's careers do not suffer if they do not have an advanced degree, and that promotion boards do not necessarily favor those with graduate degrees (questions one and two). To make matters even more confusing the officers believe that a graduate degree is a valuable career tool, and they encourage their fellow officers to seek such credentials.

To magnify an already quizzical problem, I posed two more questions. These questions, and their respective responses, are provided below:

14. In order of priority, with 1 being the most important and 7 least important, rate the following areas as they impact on officer promotion opportunities:

| | Company Grade | Field Grade |
|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Performance (fitness reports) | 1 | 1 |
| Personal decorations | 4 | 4 |
| Military schools | 3 | 3 |
| Billets held | 2 | 2 |
| Graduate degree | 7 | 7 |
| Personal appearance | 5 | 6 |
| Who you know | 6 | 5 |

15. Please rank the following reasons for seeking a graduate degree in order of importance (1 being the most important and 10 being the least important):

| | Company Grade | Field Grade |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| Get a good civilian job | 4 | 3 |
| Meet other people | 7 | 7 |
| Good for my career | 2 | 4 |
| Gain additional knowledge | 1 | 1 |
| Supervisor wants me to go | 8 | 9 |
| Be able to contribute more to society | 5 | 5 |
| Prestige | 6 | 6 |
| Social pressure | 9 | 8 |
| Improve my communication skills (reading and writing) | 3 | 2 |
| Spouse wanted me to go | 10 | 10 |

The officers' ranking of the provisions in question 14 is consistent with the responses to the first two questions indicating that they consider graduate degrees low on the list of promotion criteria. In question 15, however, they indicate that advanced degrees have a career value. So, one might deduct that in terms of criteria, graduate degrees rank low but they are perceived as making some difference.

The bottom line is that there is no bottom line. Many good officers have absolutely no desire to seek a graduate degree but want to make themselves more competitive. They sacrifice what little family time they have to work toward an advanced degree, a task that can take as long as six or seven years when juggling deployed time. On the other hand, there are those who may not be the cream-of-the-crop but gain an edge by virtue of their degrees, often at the expense of their job performance.

Essentially, the problem exists because officers are forced to speculate about the military hierarchy's undisclosed attitude toward graduate degrees. I propose that one of two options be considered: a policy statement be published by the Department of Defense on the true value of graduate degrees as factors in promotion opportunities and that promotion boards adhere to this policy; or that information pertaining to education levels be withheld from promotion boards in order to alleviate the possibility of bias. The second option, by the way, was under consideration by the Air Force in the 1970s. Either way, we need to know where we stand relative to this issue. Personally, I feel that an education, regardless of discipline, can never be a waste of time because it enhances one's ability to deal with the myriad leadership challenges that officers face daily. This is not to say that the same sort of education cannot be gained by individual effort, i.e., extensive reading, military extension courses, and so on, but few of us are disciplined enough to follow through with such programs.

Based on personal experiences, I do not believe that any form of higher education is the exclusive measurement for determining an officer's leadership qualifications. It can, however, provide an officer with some critical tools to enhance inherent traits. Too many military critics have attacked us on our most blatant deficiency—communication skills—and failure to take the problem seriously would be a gross misjudgment. Graduate degrees focus heavily on developing detailed solutions to realistic and complex problems. The critical advantage is that the student is forced to define the problem clearly and present his solution(s) by means of oral and written communication. The benefit is that either the instructor, fellow students, or both provide feedback focusing on weaknesses and adding constructive criticism. This, added to existing leadership strengths, can enhance the effectiveness of an officer.

The "gunfighter" mentality is critical to our line of business, but wars are won less on machismo than on the ability to outthink the opponent. In studying military history, we often find more examples of bad leadership than good. History's accomplished leaders would probably have fared no better with an advanced degree, but one has to wonder whether those who failed might have avoided their fatal errors had they been better educated in critical thinking skills.

Notes

1. U.S. Navy Dept., *Annual Report Navy Military Personnel Statistics* (Washington: Naval Military Personnel Command, 1985), p. 6.
2. Kenneth J. Groves and James C. Shelburne, *Education in the Armed Forces* (New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, Inc., 1965), p. 1.
3. Ruben A. Cubero, "The Attainment of a Doctoral Degree Relative to Other Variables in the Promotability of United States Air Force Academy Graduates to the Rank of Colonel," Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1983, p. 1.
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5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
7. Amos A. Jordan and William J. Taylor, Jr., "The Military Man in Academia," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, March 1973, p. 141.
8. Ralph E. Haines et al., *Report of the Department of the Army Board of Review Army Officer Schools, Summary Report* (Dept. of the Army: 1966), v. 1, pp. 58-59.
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10. John W. Masland and Lawrence I. Radway, *Soldiers and Scholars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
12. George R. McLaughlin, "Graduate Study Pays Off," *Army*, July 1962, pp. 60-61.
13. William H. Tomlinson, "The Army Graduate Civil Schooling Program in the Engineering and Physical Science Fields: A Critical Evaluation," Unpublished Student Research Paper, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: 1966, pp. 75-80.
14. Ward Just, *Military Men* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 111.
15. Tomlinson, pp. 75-80.
16. Frank W. Norris et al., *Review of Army Officer Educational System, Summary Report* (Dept. of the Army: 1971), v.1, p. 9.
17. Cubero, p. 32.
18. See Stuart H. Loory, *Defeated: Inside America's Military Machine* (New York: Random House, 1973).

